

2010 Ford Fusion Hybrid: More hype than help?

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PETER BLEAKNEY FOR THE TORONTO STAR

From the outside, the hybrid version of the Ford Fusion looks the same as the non-hybrid.

2010 Ford Fusion Hybrid

PRICE: (base/as tested) \$30,664/\$35,544

ENGINE: 2.5 L four, plus 70 kW electric

POWER/TORQUE: 191 hp/ 136 lb.-ft.

FUEL CONSUMPTION: City 4.6 L/100 km (61 mpg), hwy 5.4 L (52 mpg), as tested 5.8 L (48 mpg)

COMPETITION: Toyota Camry Hybrid, Nissan Altima Hybrid

WHAT'S BEST: Seamless and effective hybrid power

WHAT'S WORST: Hard to justify cost

WHAT'S INTERESTING: Hybrid's seat fabric is made from 100 per cent recycled materials

Ford's gas-electric mid-size drives and handles well, but the cost may work against it

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

I'll be the first to admit I'm not completely sold on this whole hybrid thing. Sporting their green halos, gas/electric hybrids are hyped to the high-heavens in North America and are generally perceived as the automotive white knight that's come to save the planet.

Problem is, with hybrids taking only a tiny slice of the market, and many offering marginal real-world economy gains, the polar bears won't be dancing a jig anytime soon.

Additionally, hybrids are technologically complex, pricey, carry an environmentally toxic battery pack, and in my experience, don't return the promised fuel economy unless you drive with all the alacrity of a sedated sloth. And "extreme" hybrids like the Toyota Prius and Honda Insight are pretty joyless to pilot.

So why am I liking the \$30,664 2010 Ford Fusion Hybrid so much?

First off, the bones of the refreshed 2010 Fusion are good. This four-door mid-sized sedan feels solid and goes down the road with a planted Euro feel. The fabric seats are extremely comfortable. The ride is creamy

smooth yet body motions are well controlled. It feels good in the corners and there's real steering feel – a rarity in hybrids.

Best of all, Ford's "Next Generation" hybrid system delivers the goods in a linear and surprisingly transparent manner that doesn't ... well, ruin the driving experience.

And when I say goods, I saw 5.8 L/100 km (49 m.p.g.) on my watch. This is the most fuel-efficient hybrid sedan on the market, rated at 4.6 L/100 km (61 m.p.g.) city and 5.4 L/100 km (53 m.p.g.) highway.

The \$30,900 Toyota Camry Hybrid claims 5.7 L (49 m.p.g.) for both city and highway; the \$32,998 Nissan Altima Hybrid is rated at 5.7 L city (49 m.p.g.) and 5.9 L (47 m.p.g.) highway.

Ford's hybrid powertrain consists of a 2.5 L Atkinson cycle inline-four assisted by a 70 kW electric motor. Net output is 191 hp and 136 lb.-ft. at 2250 r.p.m., delivered to the rear wheels via an electronically controlled CVT (continuously variable transmission).

A separate generator/motor is used to recharge the 275-volt nickel-metal-hydrate battery pack that lives under the floor behind the rear seats. This pack is 24 per cent smaller, 20 per cent more powerful and requires less cooling than Ford's previous generation pack.

As with all hybrids, most of this recharging is done under braking, capturing kinetic energy that is normally lost to heat. Ford claims its regenerative braking reclaims up to 94 per cent of this energy.

Unlike other hybrids I've driven, the Fusion's braking is smooth and progressive.

More efficient climate control system, electronic throttle control, fuel ratio monitoring and a host of other tweaks contribute to its class-leading economy. Overseeing all this is Ford's latest Vehicle System Controller.

Open the Fusion Hybrid's door and two crisp LCD displays flanking the central speedometer show green grass and a blue sky. Ah, I feel better about myself all ready.

A twist of the key beckons ... silence. The display changes to one of four selectable settings, offering varying degrees of powertrain information and coaching for more fuel-efficient motoring. A clever leafy display encourages the latter – the greener you drive, the more foliage you grow.

Slip the Fusion into gear and it slides away silently. The gas motor starts up soon after, but depending on battery charge level and the weight of your right foot, many local errands can be run on battery power alone.

Once at speed, the Fusion will run up to 75 km/h on electricity, and indeed, I was always surprised, and delighted, to observe my zero emissions progress as indicated by the power delivery graph. Eking out a little more time under battery power is a rewarding challenge.

The Fusion's gas engine cycles on and off much more frequently than in other hybrids, but the process is so seamless you're never aware of it.

The only down side is some engine moan when calling for brisk acceleration (thank the CVT transmission).

Under most circumstances, however, the Fusion's cabin is quieter than a Scottish pay toilet, and with the instant torque of the electric motor, the car never feels outgunned.

The 2010 Fusion's handsome new body panels give it substance (my neighbours thought it was a Mercedes before spying the giant Gillette razor-esque Ford grille), and the interior, while not particularly exciting, benefits from higher quality soft-touch plastics. My only gripe is the signal/wiper stalk that's angled up at 45 degrees – not good for those who keep their hands at the recommended 9 and 3 o'clock positions.

The Fusion Hybrid comes standard with SYNC media interface, 17-inch alloys, dual zone climate control, reverse sensing, SOS Post Crash Alert System, 110-volt outlet and six-CD audio. My tester was fitted with optional Sony sound with sunroof (\$1,600), navigation (\$2,100), and Driver's Vision Group (\$1,400) that adds rear-view camera and blind-spot detection,

The best complement I can give the 2010 Ford Fusion Hybrid is it's the first gas-electric vehicle I was sorry to see leave my driveway.

Okay, so we know it works. Does it make financial sense?

The similarly equipped Fusion SEL with a 2.5 L four and new-for-2010 six-speed automatic is rated at 9.4 L/100 km city (30 m.p.g.) and 6.4 L/100 km highway (44 m.p.g.) and lists for \$25,096. That's a \$5,568 savings.

If most of your driving is on the highway, the 1 L/100 km advantage of the hybrid will be a mere drop in the Gerry can. The 4.8 L/100 km advantage in the city is more meaningful.

Of course, it's nigh impossible to attain published fuel economy figures, but all things being equal, the Fusion Hybrid should consume 2.9 fewer litres per 100 kilometres than the Fusion SEL in mixed driving. Based on a 20,000 km year, and regular gas at a buck a litre, you're saving about \$580 a year.

Hmmmm. Your financial adviser would laugh you out of his office.

But for most hybrid buyers, this is the cost of being green, and my hat is off to Ford for advancing the hybrid game with this fine-driving family hauler.

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